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Spice War: Ternate, Makassar, the Dutch East India Company and the struggle for the Ambon Islands (c. 1600-1656)

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XV. CONCLUSION

The deer were ultimately fine. De Vlaming's scheme to eradicate them was apparently never executed, as Valentijn, in his *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, reported on a healthy deer population on Ambon some decades later.⁹⁹⁵ However, the colonial order and associated policy of limiting clove production, of which De Vlaming can be considered the main architect, would hold sway over the region for some two centuries in one form or another. This later period cannot be understood without the almost half-century of conflict and war which preceded it, and which has been the topic of this study. By telling the story of how the VOC imposed its colonial order and clove monopoly over the region in the period leading up to 1656, it is possible to address two general issues: the wider power dynamics of the eastern archipelago, and the conduct of war in the challenging physical environment that the Ambon region presented.

THE SPICE WARS AND WIDER POWER DYNAMICS IN THE EASTERN ARCHIPELAGO

This study describes the spice wars within the wider power dynamics of the region at large. As the Company entered into alliances in the region as part of its efforts to secure exclusive access to spices, it entered into a vibrant existing political arena with its associated cultural, religious and economic networks. This shaped its relationships and policies in crucial ways.

These local considerations of state and power cannot be made into a separate category of analysis from European interests and policies for our period of study. Regional considerations over the acquisition of subjects, regions and tribute had already become entangled with, or even neatly mapped onto, European involvement and interest in the region in the early 16th century, when the Portuguese and Spanish jockeyed for control of the region and its spices. The subsequent rise of Gowa as a major power in the eastern archipelago is certainly no exception. We have seen how the expanding spheres of influence of Ternate and Gowa collided in the final decades of the 16th century, increasingly turning them into rivals in a contest not only for subjects and tributaries but also for access to trade routes and trade goods. When the Company allied itself to Ternate and sought to use this alliance as a vehicle to monopolize cloves from the Ternaten sphere of influence, it became part of this rivalry, finding itself protecting Ternaten tributaries such as Buton or seeing itself forced to take position in rival claims

995 Valentijn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, IIIa, 226.

on regions such as Solor. This strongly contributed to the outbreak of hostilities between Gowa and the Company in 1615.

Subsequent developments further demonstrate that there is no sensible way to disentangle the struggle for vassals, tribute and strategic areas from the struggle for access to trade goods such, including spices. The fleets setting out from Gowa to the Ambon region became increasingly organised and well-armed from the 1620s onwards, and traded not only in rice, cloth and cloves but also in political protection. The VOC-Ternate alliance and the efforts to obtain exclusive access to cloves were, perhaps at first sight slightly paradoxically, a major catalyst in both Gowa's political expansion and the rise of Makassar as a major trade entrepôt. They antagonized many of Ternate's tributaries while drawing both Asian and European traders to Makassar for cloves, who were willing to pay sky-rocketing prices. While Makassar was already on its way to become a consequential trade entrepôt, and would remain so after the VOC's effective attainment of a clove monopoly and even under its subsequent colonial rule from the late 1660s onwards, its rise to prominence in the 1620s and 1630s was due in no small part to the clove trade that was the result of the VOC's expansionist and restrictive policies.⁹⁹⁶ Furthermore, while Makassar might have shown itself a cosmopolitan, free and open *bandar* to the Asian and European traders visiting it, this should not blind us to the fact that Gowa also had an expansionist empire which was instrumental in its continued access to cloves.

Gowa was willing to fight for continued access to the cloves, as the Company was to experience time and time again, from the Buton Strait to Seram Laut and beyond. Its rivalry to Ternate also made it the prime alternate source of political protection to those disaffected with Ternate and the Company. On two occasions, in the late 1630s and in the early 1650s, this culminated in political leaders in the Ambon region openly offering to accept the Gowan sultan as their overlord if he would but come to their aid with military force. In both cases, after some hesitation, the Gowan court responded to the call. Both military interventions ultimately failed, but all the same, they bear clear testimony to the

996 For the role of Makassar as a trade entrepôt, see Heather Sutherland. 'Trade in VOC Indonesia : the Case of Makassar.' In: Bernard Dahm ed., *Regions and regional developments in the Malay-Indonesian World*. European colloquium on Indonesian and Malay studies (ECIMS) 6. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1992; Heather Sutherland, 'Eastern Emporium and Company Town : Trade and Society in Eighteenth Century Makassar.' In: Frank Broeze and Sinnappah Arasaratnam eds. *Brides of the Sea : Port Cities of Asia from the 16th-20th Centuries*. Kensington: New South Wales University Press, 1989.

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way in which Makassar's efforts to maintain access to cloves and Gowan political expansion were inextricably intertwined. In the final stage of the Great Hoamoal War, Arnold De Vlaming acted on this insight: realising that the success of the Gowan intervention hinged upon the support from its allies and tributaries throughout the region, he widened the scope of the conflict accordingly, attacking and blockading Gowan tributaries and staging areas from Bima and Timor to the Banggai Islands, aided by Ternaten fleets.

The Spice Wars, in other words, make no sense without investigating the European interests and policies in tandem with those of local powers such as Gowa-Tallo and Ternate. This also holds a historiographical lesson, in that, as noted in the introduction, much of the recent study of the eastern archipelago has tended to be either focussed very locally, or to have given wide bird's eye views of cultural and economic networks over long time spans. While such studies have been tremendously valuable to the progress of the field, they have tended to gloss over the specifics of regional power dynamics. These, however, are also crucial to our understanding of the history of the region, and we would be wise not to leave them lying untouched in the hands of earlier generations of historians from the colonial era.

It bears emphasizing, however, that while the VOC became part of existing power dynamics in the region, in some ways adapting to them and engaging with expanding local powers such as Gowa, this does not mean that it was just another of those powers vying for control. As this dissertation has also aimed to show, the VOC was a different beast in crucial ways – originally seeking a monopoly because it was a trading company driven by European mercantile considerations. The treaty regime it set up in order to obtain this monopoly and the ways it sought to enforce it – by severing existing economic and cultural ties, by attempting to destroy Bandanese society wholesale, by sustained environmental warfare and dismantling existing social and political structures – were unprecedented in the region, even when compared to earlier Iberian policies. While Gowa certainly was an expanding power in the eastern archipelago and a rival of Ternate before the arrival of the first Dutch ships, and this rivalry impacted the way the VOC's own relations in the region subsequently took shape, the VOC's policies dramatically destabilized the region and transformed the nature of its power dynamics, driving Gowa to step up its direct political involvement – and ultimately upending the entire existing political order. By 1656, after all, the VOC had imposed a particularly restrictive colonial regime on large swaths of Maluku, and would do the same in Makassar a good decade later.

A minor yet interesting additional observation to make is that as the Company's monopoly regime became more restrictive from the 1610s onwards, and the Company therefore met with an increasing amount of opposition, such regional power dynamics became a major source of distrust, frustration and anxiety for Company officials. Every governor of Ambon from Van der Hagen onwards found himself in an impossible situation as a consequence of the VOC's policies as formulated in Batavia and the Netherlands, which tasked him with not only maintaining the exclusive rights on purchasing cloves for a fixed price, but, increasingly, a host of additional measures such as keeping any and all Asian traders from the region. These backfired terribly in the late 1610s and early 1620s and, added to the effects of the violent conquest and depopulation of the Banda islands in the same period, bred great resentment and hostility towards the Company in a political and physical landscape that was patently not under its control.

Artus Gijssels personified this shift in atmosphere and attitude most clearly – his *Grondig Verhaal van Amboyna*, based on his experiences in the region in the 1610s, is testimony to great interest in the Ambon region in particular, and his *Verhael van enige oorlogen in Indië*, written *en route* to the Netherlands in 1620, just before Banda was ultimately conquered and depopulated, is nothing short of an indictment of the policy that Coen, with the blessings of the directors in the Netherlands, had been putting into effect over the past few years, and a defence of the interests of the people of the Ambon region. As he returned to the region as governor in 1631, he had, in a sense, been proven right, but now he himself was caught up in the spiral of fear and mistrust which had the region in its grip. Soon, plagued by 'doubts and a thousand fears', he imagined how 'the Moors' in the region were hatching 'numerous secret schemes', and used this as a justification for 'extreme measures' in his correspondence with Batavia, from where he was subsequently given the go-ahead to step up his clove eradication campaigns in the region and further escalate the conflict.

While we find such expressions of mistrust and anxiety in generous amounts in the Dutch source material, the material documenting the worries, anxieties and resentments on the Ambonese and Ternaten side is far more sparse. We have seen some clear expressions of exasperation and concern with Company actions in the *Hikayat Tanah Hitu*, for instance from Kapitan Hitu Tepil when faced with Company intentions to conquer Banda, or the meeting in the wake of the arrest of Kakiali. Mediated through Dutch observers, we also catch glimpses of the kinds of frustrations and anxieties that would have driven the conflict forward from the Ambonese and Ternaten side: Sultan Hamzah finding himself in

the great cabin of Van Diemen's ship suddenly giving utterance to a pang of concern that the governor-general might capture and kill him; the rumours going around among the Christian Ambonese that the Company was going to deport them all; Kakiali, quite justifiably unwilling to come down from Wawani for fear of his power and his life; Majira's success in playing on fears among the Muslim inhabitants of the region that the Company would take their religion away from them, and that they would all go the way of the Bandanese.

It is difficult to concretely ascertain the effect and role of distrust and anxiety as a force of history, certainly for such a drawn-out and large conflict.⁹⁹⁷ If we are to take the word of some of the Ambonese governors for it, though, the conflict that the monopoly regime had unleashed in the region certainly bred anxiety and frustration in those tasked with maintaining the monopoly and fighting the wars. They considered Ambon the most difficult governorship in all of the Indies and invariably complained about the difficult and treacherous political and physical environment in which they had to operate. All in all, the Spice Wars were characterized by a destructive downward spiral of mutual distrust and frustration, set in motion by the monopoly policies as they took shape in the late 1610s, complicating older notions of the Company's 'rational use of violence'.⁹⁹⁸

THE SPICE WARS AND EARLY MODERN COLONIAL WARFARE

It was not only the political dynamics of the region that bred such anxieties. As this dissertation has argued, the conflict also presented the VOC with a unique and daunting set of military challenges. The world of islands, craggy coastlines, and inhospitable mountainous jungle made warfare and patrolling prohibitively difficult, rendering many established European tactics and strategies largely useless. The huge clove profits that Asian traders made in the region also led to an influx of military technology and know-how. Makasar vessels brought English and Japanese firearms, European gunpowder and Gowan fort-building. The latter complemented local fort-building practices which, as I have argued, had deep historical roots in the region but were given further impetus by the advance of gunpowder weapons and European encroachment. The Company's opponents

997 But for a more specific case study which is therefore able to bring the role of fear and anxiety into sharper focus, see Clulow, *Amboina 1623*.

998 This notion is most famously proposed in Niels Steensgaard. *The Asian Trade Revolution of the Seventeenth Century: the East India Companies and the Decline of the Caravan Trade*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974. For further discussion of the role of fear in early colonialism, see Clulow, *Amboina 1623*, esp. introduction and epilogue.

made remarkably effective use of muskets, firing them from the cover of the forest or from the small fortifications that characterized warfare in the region. All in all, in Ambon as in so many zones of conflict between Europeans and non-Europeans, the former's advantages were slight and relative.⁹⁹⁹

To be fair, the Company certainly enjoyed some military advantages in line with the military revolution arguments, such as its forts. While the surprise attack of 1651 was spectacularly and uniquely successful at driving the VOC from almost all of their fortifications in the region outside Ambon proper and the Lease Islands, conquering Castle Victoria was never attempted. A full-fledged European-style fortress with angled bastions, a good amount of artillery and a sizeable garrison, in an area surrounded by Christian Ambonese, was beyond the means and ambitions of the VOC's opponents in the region – vindicating insights into the decisive edge such forts had in the projection of European power.¹⁰⁰⁰ As a consequence, the Company, even if unable to project its power, could not be dislodged either. While VOC ships could be cumbersome and ineffective for waging war in this monsoon island world, they were still extremely valuable in military campaigns due to their large cargo capacity, their artillery and their virtual unassailability for local vessels. Company soldiers did often enjoy an advantage in terms of discipline over their opponents on Hitu and Hoamoal, with Company commanders often marvelling at the defensibility of local fortifications but uttering surprise about how soon they were abandoned, as their defenders 'would have been able to inflict great violence on us, had they not lacked the courage.' Additionally, while many governors of the Ambon region were permanently frustrated about the lack of military means at their disposal, in a genuine crisis, Batavia and other hubs in the VOC empire could come to the rescue. We saw this happen in 1637, when Van Diemen led an expeditionary force to the region, but also in 1631 and subsequent years with the fleets under Anthonissen, and in the course of the Great Hoamoal War, with the fleets and troops that De Vlaming brought. Such fleets could bring about a spectacular reversal of fortunes, as seen most prominently in 1631, 1637 and 1652.

While such factors did confer military advantages on the Company in military confrontations, they did not solve the quandary that enforcing the spice

999 For a more elaborate assessment of this debate, see Andrade, *Lost Colony*, pp. 14-15.

1000 E.g. by Andrade, *The Gunpowder Age*, esp. pp. 211-234; Geoffrey Parker. 'The artillery fortress as an engine of European overseas expansion' in: id., *Success is never final: empire war and faith in early modern Europe*. New York: Basic Books, 2002, pp. 192-221.

monopoly brought with it. In order to do that, the Company needed effective control of a vast region and its population. This was prohibitively difficult: as one observer noted, ‘the mountains are too steep, the inhabitants and the clove trees too many, the roads to the clove trees impassable and the settlements naturally strong.’ Patrolling the extensive coastlines of the region presented similar problems.

Faced with such difficulties, Company officials increasingly relied on local allies and tactics. Gijssels and his successors heavily relied on the indigenous fleets of *kora-kora*. They employed the Alfurs of Seram’s interior, whose guerrilla tactics and ferocious reputation made them formidable allies. This increasing reliance on local tactics and troops was not just due to the limited numbers of soldiers and ships that Gijssels received from Batavia: as this dissertation has argued, in the island world of the Ambon region, with its coral reefs and platforms, jungles and inaccessible landscapes, such local tactics, troops and vessels were also simply more effective, providing solutions for military problems that the Company’s European troops, ships and tactics did not. The enthusiasm with which the successive governors of Ambon employed the *hongji* would strain the system to the breaking point, its overuse being a major factor in the 1636 revolt, during which Company control over the Ambon region almost completely unravelled.

Over the first half of the seventeenth century, Company commanders in Ambon increasingly learned to fruitfully combine the use of their local troops and vessels with that of their European soldiers and ships – for instance, by employing their Alfur allies to make a siege even more effective, as their head-hunting bands were very effective in cutting off the besieged from provisions and supplies. One of the clearer examples discussed in this dissertation is the siege of Ihamahu in 1632, where the *hongji*, European troops and ships and Alfur allies brought over from the Seramese mainland were all employed in specific ways to make the most of their strengths.

Ihamahu also illustrates something even more important to the Company’s conduct of the war. In the decision-making process, the stated goals, the course and the outcome of the siege, it is clear that Company officials were increasingly conceiving the conflict as a resource war, and by implication, as an environmental war – and adapted their methods accordingly.

Taking ‘revenge against the fruit trees’ was not something alien or innovative in the region. As I argued in Chapter VII, it also appears to have been an important part of local war practices: as early as 1599, Dutch sources record how rival communities in the Banda Islands cut the other’s nutmeg trees during raids, and

just before Gijssels' 1632 siege, the hongis of the kimelaha took revenge on the fruit and clove trees of the village of Itawaka. What *was* new to the region, however, was the massive scale and sustained way in which the Company came to use such tactics, as part of a range of tactics and strategies to target the livelihood and food supply of the region's inhabitants.

As early as the 1610s, some VOC officials, mostly in response to frustrated monopoly ambitions in the Banda islands, had started advocating extirpating both clove and nutmeg in those areas that the Dutch could not control. Some of them also suggested removing the inhabitants as well and the Company acted out that suggestion in Banda in 1621.¹⁰⁰¹ As to trees, it was the clove that would be the main object of concerted extirpation campaigns. In 1625, governor Van Speult, faced with increasing opposition to Company policies in the region, and his forces suddenly boosted by the arrival of the Nassau Fleet, went on a campaign to extirpate cloves entirely from Hoamoal. While he fell short of this goal, his troops reported cutting some 65,000 of them, in addition to a smaller number of other economically valuable trees such as coconut palms.

From the early 1630s onwards, such tactics were broadened into full-fledged scorched earth tactics. Governor Gijssels, in particular, concentrated his efforts on destroying the livelihood of the inhabitants of the region: not only the clove trees, but 'all fruit-bearing wood' and seagoing vessels. The use of their indigenous subjects and allies was also increasingly geared towards that goal: the great amounts of local *corvée* labour the Company could call on was employed to cut trees, the Alfurs, as stated, employed to cut off supply lines to besieged settlements. Environmental warfare reached its apex during the Great Hoamoal War, when Arnold de Vlaming made a point of rendering areas such as Manipa entirely uninhabitable, and the destruction of sago forests and other sources of food became central to his strategy. His strategy came to extend into regions well outside the Company's usual area of influence, including Seram's north coast, the Sula and Banggai Islands, Tiworo and various regions along Sulawesi's east coast. Incidentally, De Vlaming took the opportunity to also force the inhabitants of North Maluku's clove-producing regions to eradicate their own cloves

1001 For my own brief inventory of such ideas see Mostert and Manuhutu, '1621: violence and depopulation on and around Banda' (2021) on the website Pala: <https://pala.wfm.nl/1621-2/1621-article/?lang=en>.

‘voluntarily’. His efforts were so thorough that by the end of the war, there was a global shortage of cloves and a local lack of food.

While we might associate the notion of environmental warfare mostly with military conflicts of the industrial age, Emmanuel Kreike, in his book *Scorched Earth*, has recently argued that the environment is inherently part of every military conflict and that tactics of resource control and environmental destruction were therefore common aspects of warfare everywhere in the world. The eastern archipelago in the early 17th century is, perhaps, an exceptionally clear illustration, although we also need to recognize that this does not imply parity. Even though such tactics had been used locally before, the sustained way and massive scale on which the Company was able to employ them was truly something new in the region.

Such strategies, ultimately aimed at destroying the livelihood of the inhabitants, were aided by measures outside the Ambon region as well, for one by the patrols and blockades at strategic chokepoints such as the northern entrance of the Buton Strait, the area around the island of Selayar or, occasionally, the Makassar roadstead itself (albeit the latter without much success.) Of much more central importance, however, was that the Company was also able to influence the price of cloves on the world market. We have seen how at a crucial moment in 1634, an exasperated governor-general Brouwer, faced with unsuccessful blockades of Makassar and the unravelling of Company control in the Ambon region, suggested that the directors might try to lower prices in Europe, thus ultimately undercutting the rationale for the clove trade to Makassar. His words were heeded, and the Company started dumping large amounts of cloves onto the market by paying them out as dividends to their shareholders. It worked: prices in Amsterdam dropped abruptly the next year, with prices elsewhere in Europe responding. The European companies could therefore no longer pay such high prices in Makassar and still turn a profit. By 1641, the price of cloves had dropped to 100 rials per bahar on the Makassar market, down from 300 only a decade before, and cloves still remained unsold. As a consequence, the interest of Makassar-based traders in the Ambon region dropped substantially, with fewer traders willing to risk it. This, in turn, was of great consequence to the financial base of the kimelaha at Hoamoal and his followers, and might have been a strong contributing factor to the collapse of the power base of kimelaha Luhu. While the drop in clove prices as a result of the dividends was described in earlier literature, the exact goal was not. It was, in fact, an attempt by the world’s first joint-stock company to win a war on the far side of the globe by driving down

the world market price of a specific commodity, brought about by dumping large amounts onto the market by way of its shareholders.

A final illustration of the prominent role of landscape and environment in the conflict is provided by the measures the Company took in areas it brought under its effective control: not only dismantling the political order but also by resettlement schemes. We have seen how, after its military defeat in 1643, the Hituese population was forced down from its defensible hilltop settlements and concentrated in areas around Company forts. During and in the immediate wake of the Great Hoamoal War an even more drastic resettlement scheme was enacted, in which the original population of Hoamoal was distributed over Ambon in a scheme intended to efface its society as completely as possible, with Hoamoal itself to remain ‘an eternal wasteland’. The inhabitants of the nearby islands of Kelang, Boano and Manipa, for their part, were largely resettled around a Company fort on one of the islands, in a scheme more comparable to that also employed in Hitu a good decade earlier.

If we therefore wish to account for how the Company was ultimately able to project its control over the region, we should not primarily look for it in military drill, the broadside sailing vessel or gunpowder technology. Truly new and central were a combination of resource control and social engineering. The former came in the form of deliberate and sustained environmental destruction and other measures to deny access to food and economic resources, as well as employing the economic power afforded by its increasing hold over the world clove market against precisely the forces that same hold had unleashed. The latter came in the form of forcing communities to resettle along the coast and usually in areas guarded by a Company fort, while also dismantling the existing political order, providing for both a political and physical landscape the Company was able to more easily control.

This raises a number of issues about the nature of early modern colonial warfare and its continuity through time. While concepts such as strategic resettlement, social engineering and environmental and economic warfare are comparatively well-developed for colonial conflicts of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they were, until recently, not readily applied to early modern colonial conflicts.¹⁰⁰² There is a dawning realisation that the character of colonial warfare

1002 Some recent work includes Tom Menger. ‘“Press the Thumb onto the Eye”: Moral Effect, Extreme Violence, and the Transimperial Notions of British, German, and Dutch Colonial Warfare, ca. 1890–1914.’ *Itinerario* 46, no. 1 (2022): 84–108; Id.,

and violence might have been more continuous than we have tended to conceive of it. Recent works that take such an approach include Dierk Walter's *Colonial Violence*, which tries to assess colonial violence as a category from the sixteenth century onwards. Most relevant to the topic at hand is Kreike's *Scorched Earth*, already mentioned above, which demonstrates the continuities in the use of environmental warfare from the early modern period onwards. For all the developments in technology, the conduct of war and the colonial state, the Dutch empire's violent beginnings has more in common with its violent end than we used to think.¹⁰⁰³ Taking this to heart will help forward the study of early colonial conflicts, and early modern warfare in general, opening new avenues of inquiry and moving global military history beyond the focus on technology, drill and logistics that has long characterized it.

This under-recognized continuity does not only apply to specific forms of violence and warfare but, perhaps, also more generally, to the violent nature of Dutch colonialism in Asia itself – which brings us back to where we started. It was not so long ago that the Dutch East India Company tended to be described, both by scholars and in more popular literature, as primarily a trading operation. While recent decades have seen renewed interest in the Company as a military and political power, it is still generally conceived as qualitatively different from what are considered more imperialist colonial ventures, such as those by the Iberians in Central and South America, or those of the various European powers from the nineteenth century onwards. In this view of the Company, the events in Banda in 1621 have often taken the role of a dramatic but perhaps not wholly representative episode from its early history. Banda, however, was not an isolated event. It formed part and parcel of the wider dynamics of Company policy in the eastern archipelago – the Company's core area of operation at the time. As this dissertation has illustrated, coercive treaties, outright conquest, environmental warfare and depopulation would remain central in the Company's mode of op-

'Concealing Colonial Comparability: British Exceptionalism, Imperial Violence, and the Dynamiting of Cave Refuges in Southern Africa, 1879-1897.' *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 50, no. 5 (2022): 860–89. For work on strategic resettlement in twentieth-century colonial conflicts see the various articles of Moritz Feichtinger, University of Basel.

1003 This phrasing is borrowed from one recent comparative study of the wars of decolonization: Thijs Brocades Zaalberg and Bart Luttikhuis eds. *Empire's Violent End: Comparing Dutch, British and French Wars of decolonization, 1945-1962*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022.

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eration in the region for decades to follow, and as such, were more structural to how the early Company operated than they have thus far been recognized to be.